

# Non-Resistance

*WILLARD L. SPERRY*

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**“NON-RESISTANCE”**





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# NON-RESISTANCE

BY  
WILLARD L. SPERRY

A SERMON PREACHED IN THE  
CENTRAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
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*Matthew 5:39*

“Resist not him that is evil.”



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“The position taken by most Christians that Jesus made it a rule to say what he did not mean,” says Ernest Crosby, “is fast becoming untenable. Common intellectual honesty before long will have completely undermined it. We must choose between Christ plus his teachings on the one hand and an honest paganism on the other. I once read the portions of the Sermon on the Mount which refer to turning the other cheek and giving up one’s cloak to my nine year old boy with the object of getting his opinion. ‘Oh what stuff!’ was the only comment. I value this answer as a frank expression of judgment. If every Christian who, at the bottom of his heart, believes that these injunctions are stuff, would cordially say so, it would be a great gain in the cause of truthfulness, whatever might be the result on the dogma of the inspiration of the gospels.”

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There is probably no single injunction of Jesus' which has so signally and so consistently failed of fulfilment as this injunction, "I say unto you, Resist not him that is evil." Not only has Christendom failed to practise the doctrine of non-resistance, but it has not even thought seriously about it. A diligent search through the catalogue of the Public Library reveals only a pathetically brief literature in the interests of this program. True, the Society of Friends, and kindred sects like the Moravians, have been a conspicuous minority, bearing witness to this doctrine both with their lips and in their lives, but most of Christendom has regarded their manner of life as quixotic and impracticable. Outside these sects only three or four voices in America have been raised in behalf of Jesus' injunction not to resist evil with evil. The one voice which we would recognize is that of William Lloyd Garrison, who regarded the preaching of non-resistance as his major mission, and the preaching of abolition as his minor mission. Because he thought that Jesus meant what he said upon this and similar matters he

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was branded by "The Independent" as an "infidel of the most degraded class." Garrison founded here in Boston, in 1838, a little Society of Non-Resistance, and later published a brief monthly in the interests of this cause. Both the Society and the paper languished and soon died. Garrison was before his time. The only other clear non-sectarian voice which has been raised in the modern world in behalf of non-resistance is that of Tolstoi, to whom our text was the very keystone of Christianity, the open sesame to the meaning of the gospels. Tolstoi's dramatic experiment in literal Bible Christianity remains as one of the great question marks writ after our whole contemporary religion, one of the real spiritual assets of our time. Practically all Tolstoi's religious writings resolve themselves into fugues upon this one theme, you must not resist evil with evil, you must overcome evil with good. But, then, of course, Tolstoi was Tolstoi.

"What is going to stop the war?" asked a friend the other day. None of us can answer the question. Economic insolvency,

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military exhaustion, a general spontaneous uprising of the common people. These are the ultimate possibilities. No one mentions religion. "We look to the Church that takes for its purposes the name of the Prince of Peace," says Mr. H. G. Wells. "In England except for the smallest, weakest protest against war, any sort of war, on the part of a handful of Quakers, Christianity is silent. Its workers, for the most part, are busied in the loyal manufacture of flannel garments and an inordinate quantity of bed socks for the wounded. It is an extraordinary thing to go now and look at one's parish church, and note the pulpit and the orderly arrangements for the hearers and to reflect that this is just the local representative of a universally present organization for the communication of ideas. That all over Europe there are such pulpits, such possibilities of gathering and saying, and that it gathers nothing and has nothing to say."

There are a great many persons who are finding themselves forced by the logic of events to the conclusion that the Christian

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Church ought to be gathering people together, now, and preaching to them dogmatically the literal doctrine of non-resistance. The forced moral option of our time is that between "Christ and Antichrist." "If our choice is to be Christ," writes a thoroughly unecclesiastical friend from England, "then you have got to talk to us about Christ. We moderns have forgotten him. Revive our memories. And give him and his teaching without compromise."

This is a fair challenge to all of us who pretend to be the spokesmen for the gospel. The command to non-resistance belongs to that great body of moral precept given us in the Sermon on the Mount, which is, by common confession, a counsel of perfection. The absolute moral ideal preached by Jesus constitutes for us all the practical dilemma of our would-be discipleship. Christendom has traditionally sought readjustment to the austere morality of the original gospel by underwriting it with some lower requirements which satisfy the conventions. Catholicism enjoins the "counsels of perfection" only upon the "religious," and pre-

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scribes for the laity the less exacting "commandments." Protestantism either admits a "half-way covenant," or, as in latter times, "spiritualizes" the letter of the gospel. Everywhere there is this "ethical bi-metalism," by which the original currency of the Kingdom has been debased.

It seems more and more obvious that this process is fatal to the moral significance and moral power of the person and teaching of Jesus. We have been proceeding upon the theory that the Sermon on the Mount is a program which, by ingenious exegesis, can be dovetailed into the world as it now is. Our supposition is false. Our effort has failed. In altering the gospel to suit the present status we have destroyed its original character. This modified Christianity is the Christianity which now is declared bankrupt.

There never was a time when it was more essential for us to hold clearly before our eyes the unqualified moral ideal announced by the gospels. If Christianity is to make any contribution to our contemporary extremity, that contribution must follow upon

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a fresh apprehension of the actual life preached and lived by Jesus. That we shall all be rebuked by the discrepancy between the gospel and our own circumstance is slight loss, compared to the gain which will accrue to us if we win a fresh appreciation of pure Christianity and uncompromised.

The doctrine of non-resistance is so alien to the conventional orthodoxies of our heredity and our environment, that it calls for explanation. I quote, therefore, the questions and answers from a little catechism of non-resistance published seventy years ago by William Lloyd Garrison's disciples.

“Q. Whence originated the term ‘non-resistance’?”

“A. From the injunction, Resist not evil, Matthew v: 39.

“Q. Is the word resistance to be taken in its widest meaning, that is, as showing that no resistance whatever is to be shown to evil?”

“A. No, it is to be taken in the strict sense of the Saviour's injunction; that is, we are not to retaliate evil with evil. Evil

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is to be resisted by all just means, but never with evil.

“Q. May a man kill or maim another in self defense?

“A. No.

“Q. May he fight with an army against enemies or against domestic rebels?

“A. Of course not. He cannot take part in any war or warlike preparations. He cannot use death-dealing arms. He cannot resist injury with injury, no matter whether he be alone or with others, through himself or through others.

“Q. In what does the chief significance of the doctrine of non-resistance consist?

“A. In that it alone makes it possible to tear the evil out by the root, both out of one's own heart and out of the neighbor's heart. The doctrine forbids doing that by which evil is perpetuated and multiplied. To offend another because he offended us means to repeat an evil deed. Satan cannot be driven out by Satan, evil cannot be vanquished by evil. True non-resistance is the one true resistance to evil.

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“Q. But if the idea of the doctrine is right is it practicable?”

“A. It is as practicable as any good prescribed by the Law of God. The good cannot under all circumstances be executed without self renunciation, privation, suffering, and in extreme cases, the loss of life itself. But it is incomparably safer to act justly than unjustly—it is safer even in relation to the present life.”

This, then, is the Christian attitude of non-resistance. It is not something weak and cowardly, not a craven acquiescence in evil. It is not simply lying down and letting the evil walk over you. It is standing up on your feet and facing evil with good. It is a marching unarmed up to the muzzles of the guns. Let us have done with the idea that a non-resister is a coward. He is the only man who can understand the Bible saying that “perfect love casteth out fear.” Garrison was a non-resister, but it was Garrison who said, “I am in earnest. I will not equivocate; I will not excuse; I will not retreat a single inch, and I will be heard.” Non-resistance is the fearless

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assertion of justice and love, in the face of wrong.

This doctrine of non-resistance, the overcoming of evil with good, is precisely as reasonable as the doctrine of forgiveness, no more, no less. For both non-resistance and forgiveness are expressions of the determination to ignore evil in an offender because of the latent good in him. When we forgive a man we treat the evil that he has done as though it did not exist. We try to convince him of his unrealized and better self. And non-resistance differs from forgiveness only in its direction. For while forgiveness is an act of retrospect, non-resistance is an act of anticipation. In forgiving a man we ignore the fact that he has done evil, in non-resistance we ignore the fact that he proposes to do evil. If non-resistance is unjustifiable and impracticable, then forgiveness is also unjustifiable and impracticable, for they are one and the same thing.

The field for the preaching of non-resistance as the only ultimate and adequate solution of the problems raised by aggressive evil in the world is open and unoccupied.

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No statesman, no socialist, no economist as such, advocates this program. It is peculiarly a Christian policy. If the witness of the Church is not raised in its behalf, then it will fail of a hearing. But if we, who are of "The Way," have faith enough to preach this doctrine of non-resistance with conviction we shall find a world ready to listen. Alike in religious and secular circles men are open to conviction as never before upon the practicability as well as the righteousness of this dogma. The signs of the times are significant. There is, for example, a whimsical fancy by Ray Stannard Baker in one of the current magazines which describes the ultimate invasion of America by the military conquerors of Europe. America meanwhile has become converted to non-resistance, has demolished her coast defences, has disbanded her army and militia, has scrapped her battleships, and fortified herself only with international good will. The invaders are met while yet at sea by a reception committee tendering the hospitality and freedom of the country. They land on Long Island and instantly dig them-

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selves into trenches and wait, and nothing happens. No defenders appear. They send a peremptory demand for the surrender of New York City. They receive in return a cordial invitation to come right along and try their hand at governing New York, which under Tammany Rule has not been at all as creditable a municipality as any one of the great European cities. And then the invasion collapses and War is forever exorcised from the world by one spontaneous burst of international laughter. Beneath the genial satire there is the serious truth of a newly apprehended idea. This article would not have been possible a year ago.

And then there is the favorite and familiar question for contemporary casuistry. What would have happened if the Belgians and French had not resisted violence with violence. What if they had simply laid down their arms, unitedly, and taken their stand in the highways and said, we refuse to recognize the anticipated evil, we see only the common good of all the peoples of Europe. We stand in the way of your advance to

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remind you of human values, not of military necessity. The minister of the French congregation which meets in our chapel on Sunday afternoons is a native Belgian, and it is his great regret that his people were not organized for this effort, even though it had meant national martyrdom instead of international war.

Then I have a British friend who wishes that the Church of England had been organized for non-resistance as the State was organized for war. That the Church of England had had her companies and regiments of communicants, her transport and commissary departments ready for the emergency, so that in the critical hour she could have marched five hundred thousand, a million Christians, into the face of her foes, singing the hymns of the Church universal, and chanting the creed of the Kingdom of God upon earth. He says there is no government in the world that would assume the terrible responsibility or risk the moral odium of butchering such an army for the sake of its policies of aggression.

Well, then there was that congressman

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who suggested, as a serious measure, that Congress should vote the demanded appropriation for increased armaments and then should turn over the whole appropriation to relief work in Europe. What nation, he asked, not without good reason, would attack another nation that had voluntarily laid off its armor to assume a ministry of brotherly charity?

Now all these whimsicalities and visions are significant not in themselves, but as signs of the times. The doctrine of non-resistance when thus stated captivates the imagination. It commands respect and enthusiasm. It appeals to us not only as ideal, but as more practicable than we had ever dreamed. We begin really to believe that "The man who will not strike back is the only man who cannot be conquered, and the treatment of him becomes an insoluble problem for the tyrant. It is the non-resistant alone who can overcome superior power."

There are two obvious objections to the doctrine of non-resistance that will always be urged.

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The first is an objection which bulks large with many of us. That however plausible non-resistance may seem, it is in the last analysis unnatural, and therefore cannot and ought not to be put into practice. It is man's nature to fight, the struggle for existence is the law of his life. This faith is deep rooted, not only in Nietzsche and Treitschke and Bernhardi, but in us all, in so far as we comprehend the facts of the evolutionary process. Non-resistance finds no sanction in evolution. How then can we square it with this major article of our modern creed? This is the problem which we all see so clearly now; the problem which Huxley saw and faced and answered twenty-five years ago in his *Romanes Lecture*, one of the really classic utterances of the last century, that might well be circulated now as a tract for the times. "Man and society," he says, "are undoubtedly subject to the cosmic process. The struggle for existence tends to eliminate those less fitted to adapt themselves to the circumstances of their existence. The strongest and most self assertive tend to tread down

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the weaker. But social progress means a checking of the cosmic process at every step and the substitution for it of another, which may be called the ethical process; the end of which is not the survival of those who may happen to be the fittest, but of those who are ethically the best. The practice of that which is ethically best—what we call goodness or virtue—involves a course of conduct, which in all respects is opposed to that which leads to success in the struggle for existence. In place of ruthless self assertion, it demands self-restraint; in place of thrusting aside or treading down all competitors, it requires that the individual shall not merely respect but help his fellows. Its influence is directed not so much to the survival of the fittest as to the fitting of as many as possible to service. It repudiates the gladiatorial theory of existence. Let us understand once for all that the ethical progress of society depends not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it.” It would be a strange reversal of affairs if now, in civilization’s extremity, Huxley were found to

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be the real Christian and we church people were to be found the heretics, because he went on record in behalf of the gospel virtues as against the natural instincts, while we bow in helpless acquiescence to what we call the law of our natures.

And the second objection to the doctrine of non-resistance is that it is impracticable. It may be impracticable as society is immediately organized. But who of us holds any brief for the present order, who is a blind devotee of the "god-of-things-as-they-are"? The worship of existing institutions, in the political and economic world, is the idolatry from which we pray to be delivered. For the man to whom the competitive processes of contemporary society are the gospel as well as the law, non-resistance is impracticable. But most of us look for a new earth. We realize that men must be "converted" to non-resistance as to all the other characteristic Christian dogmas, that Christianity itself is a revolutionary program, a transvaluation of all values.

Perhaps we shall have to make private and humble experiments in non-resistance

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before we can be convinced that it is thoroughly practicable. We must have a few personal victories in this matter of overcoming evil with good before we can understand the homely wisdom of this seeming folly. The history of individual experiments in non-resistance is tremendously significant. Stanley made it work in Africa. John G. Paton made it work in the New Hebrides. Thomas Mott Osborne is making it work in Sing Sing. The history of community experiments in non-resistance is not less significant. The conquest and occupation of America was achieved only after many costly collisions with the Indians. But for seventy years, until they were outvoted in their legislature, the Society of Friends in Pennsylvania lived in absolute peace and security. When Maryland, Virginia, New York and New England were being visited with massacre upon massacre, the Quakers of Pennsylvania went scot free. So long as they practised non-resistance they never lost a single settler at the hands of the natives. "Their security and quiet," says one of the Society's historians, "was not a transient

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freedom from war. Having determined not to fight, the Pennsylvanians maintained no soldiers and possessed no arms. Therefore, they became armed without arms; they became strong without strength; they became safe without the ordinary means of safety."

If it be objected that non-resistance might work with simple and primitive foes, but not with sophisticated soldiers of the modern world, listen to two extraordinary quotations from a large number of just such letters from the front, published in the weekly London "Times" for January 8. The first is from a Belgian soldier. "Christmas Day in the trenches! It must have been sad, you say. Well I am not sorry to have spent it there, and the recollection of it will ever be one of imperishable beauty. At midnight a baritone stood up and sang, "Tis midnight, Christian!" The cannonade ceased, and when the hymn finished applause broke out from our side and from the German trenches. The Germans too were celebrating Christmas two hundred yards away from us. Now I am going to tell you

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something that you will think incredible, but I give you my word that it is true. At dawn the Germans displayed a placard over the trenches on which was written 'Happy Christmas!' and then leaving their trenches they advanced towards us singing and shouting, 'Comrades!' No one fired. We also left our trenches. They asked us to spend Christmas Day without firing and the whole day passed without any fighting. Was it not splendid? Think you that we were wrong? We have been criticised here; it is said that we ought to have fired. But would it not have been dastardly?" And the other letter is from an officer of a Highland regiment. "You need not have pitied us on Christmas Day. We were in the trenches and the Germans began to make merry on Christmas Eve shouting at us to come out and meet them. I was horrified at discovering that some of our men had gone out; they met half way and they arranged (the private soldiers of one army and the private soldiers of the other army) a forty-eight hours' armistice. It was all most irregular. All the night the enemy

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sang, and during my watch they played 'Home sweet home' and 'God save the king' at half past two in the morning. It was really rather wonderful. Christmas Day out came those Germans to wish us a Happy Day. So here you are, all this talk of hate and fury at each other that has raged since the beginning of the war, quelled and stayed by the magic of Christmas. Indeed as one of the Germans said, 'But you are of the same religion as us, and to-day is the Day of Peace.' It is really a great triumph for the Church. It is great hope for future peace when two nations, hating each other as foes have seldom hated, should on Christmas Day, and for all that the word implies, lay down their arms and wish each other happiness."

Non-resistance will work, it will work in our private relationships far oftener than any of us suppose. It will also work in our public activities far more generally than we have ever dreamed. And if, sometimes, like all human ventures it fails of its end, even its failure is a victory. The signal and classic example of the failure of the doctrine

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of non-resistance, as a worldly expedient, is the death of Jesus. They killed him in spite of his non-resistance. But this signal failure of the doctrine is by common human confession the greatest spiritual triumph that the world has ever known. Socrates, Savonarola, Nathan Hale, John Brown of Ossawotomie, these martyrs were also victors in their latter end, but there is no moral victory in all history like that of Jesus on his cross. You do not need any doctrine of the atonement to sense this fact, you need not even be one of his disciples to appreciate the positive spiritual glory of that death. He who above all others overcame the world, refused and rebuked the sword that was drawn in his behalf and died in non-resistance. And the most universal religious symbol which the world knows is that symbol of his non-resistance, the cross.

We are dealing, after all, in the doctrine of non-resistance not with the calculating counsels of selfish expedience, but with permanent values. Whether non-resistance works or whether it fails to work as a means to immediate safety, it is in either event a

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positive spiritual victory over the evil that is in the world. "If only one man acted thus," said the makers of the New England catechism of non-resistance, "and all the others agreed to crucify him, would it not be more glorious for him to die in the triumph of non-resisting love, praying for his enemies, than to live wearing the crown of Cæsar bespattered with the blood of the slain?"







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